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Students' Perceptions of Discrimination in the Job Market

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Abstract

In this research we present a short review of literature explaining how historical factors and perceptions of discrimination may lead members of ethnic minority groups to target a restricted range of employment opportunities, thereby leading to disadvantage in job markets. The review shows that much of the research has been conducted in the US, and identifies a need for UK specific research.

The problem

Despite equal opportunities legislation, disadvantage is still experienced by minority ethnic groups in the labour market, with respect to level of unemployment, salary, and positions occupied within the workplace hierarchy. For example, around 11% of ethnic minority graduates are still seeking work six months after graduation compared with around 7% of White graduates (HESA, 2002).

Literature Review

To determine whether there may be reasons for the ethnic minority disadvantage other than direct and indirect discrimination among employers, literature from a range of disciplines was examined, using the PsycINFO, BIDS IBSS and Ingenta databases, and the Internet.

Major Themes

The review showed that historical context, demographics, social connectedness factors, and perceptions of discrimination may interact and be partially responsible for ethnic minority disadvantage.

The Historical Context

The historical context is important in understanding ethnic minority workplace experiences and perceptions (Carter, 2003). During the mid 20th Century migrants from the colonies entered the UK to take-up low status jobs. It has been difficult for many members of ethnic minority groups to break out of these jobs and become upwardly mobile. The economic downturn in many of the industries employing high numbers of members of some ethnic minority groups in their original settlement areas led to high ethnic minority unemployment during the later years of the 20th Century.

Demographic Complexity

Research into group differences has illustrated complex inter-relationships between variables such as gender, ethnic group membership, socio-economic background and age. For example,

male ethnic Asian graduates are less likely to obtain a graduate level job than female ethnic Asian graduates (CHERI, 2002).

Social Connectedness

Conclusions from a review of work in the US suggest that most job seekers employ informal rather than formal job search methods (Schwab, Rynes & Aldag, 1987). Spanish work has shown that graduates placed in employment through work-related social contacts had higher incomes, were more satisfied with their employment, and were more likely to be in employment related to their qualifications (Villar, Juan, Corominos & Cappell, 2000).

However, the use of informal job search strategies, such as using close social contacts in job search (e.g. friends and relatives), results in lower-paid jobs for Hispanics, whereas this strategy results in higher paying jobs for whites (Green, Tigges & Diaz, 1999). This may be because ethnic minorities tend to be disproportionately employed in lower status jobs, and therefore use of informal job search strategies by new job seekers in these communities perpetuates this pattern of employment.

Perceptions of Discrimination

Ethnic minority socialisation processes lead to the development of an awareness of discrimination (Turner & Turner, 1975). Sociological and vocational research reveals ethnic differences in perceived discrimination in career opportunity structure (Turner & Turner, 1975) and in anticipated career barriers (McWhirter, 1997). Work in US high schools shows that Mexican-American students anticipate more career barriers than European-American students (McWhirter, 1997). Such perceived discrimination may affect ethnic minority job-seekers' motivation by reducing confidence in their ability to attain their desired job. This may lead to a reduction in strength of job search self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). In turn, reduced self-efficacy may affect frequency of job-seeking behaviour, and restrict job search methods to those most likely to result in positive employment outcomes. This is one explanation of findings that Hispanic Americans are more likely to use networking with family and friends to get jobs (Mau & Kopischke, 2001). Also, people may avoid industries they perceive as historically having stereotyped their ethnic group (Carter, 2003), and restrict their prospects by targeting only newer industries. Thus, the ways in which members of ethnic minorities cope with their perceptions of discrimination may have a negative impact upon their success in the job market by limiting the jobs they apply for. The cycle of possible effects is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A schematic diagram of the effects of socialisation processes and perceived discrimination upon job-seeking self efficacy, methods and outcomes.



Methodologies Used and their Suitability for UK Studies

US studies measuring perceptions of discrimination in the job-market have adapted the Turner Perceived Discrimination Against Blacks Scale (Turner & Turner, 1975). There is no similar measure taking into consideration the contemporary UK job market, the ethnic composition of the UK, and scale wording appropriate for the 21st Century. Although personnel

psychologists have used repertory grid techniques to investigate career perceptions (e.g. Cochran, 1983), these do not appear to have been used to investigate the role that perceived discrimination may play in ethnic minority students' structuring of their career decisions. Studies often tend to use only one outcome measure (usually just an employed / unemployed dichotomy). However, there are dangers in using only a single criterion. For example, a study of nine success criteria often described in job search literature found that they were not related (Brasher & Chen, 1999).

Conclusions & Current Research

There may be a vicious cycle of socio-economic factors that causes members of ethnic minority difficulties in the job market. Most previous research has taken place in the US, and is not necessarily generalizable to the UK, given the differences in education and job markets. It is necessary to develop instruments that are suitable for use by UK researchers in this area. In a current research project we are investigating inter-ethnic differences (South Asian vs. Afro- Caribbean vs. White UK) in job search methods and outcomes among British graduates. The psychological underpinnings of any differences are also under investigation using a version of Turner and Turner's (1975) measure of perceived discrimination adapted for contemporary UK use, and a custom-designed job-seeking self-efficacy scale. In this research we have also developed a repertory grid-related method capable of yielding data concerning perceptions of discrimination in different occupations.

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